

Historical Note on the Last Dominant Gakkhar Chief Sultan Muqarrab Khan

Sultan Muqarrab Khan, the last dominant Gakkhar chief was defeated at Gujrat in 1763-64 in a battle with Sardar Gujjar Singh and Sardar Charat Singh, Sikh chiefs of the Bhangi and Sukerchakia Misls, respectively. Gujrat, the town where he had established himself for some time was attacked and besieged by the Sikhs. Sultan Muqarrab Khan extricated himself from the siege and tried to escape the onslaught with his troops and household [1]. The events that followed remain unclear to this day but evidently he was overpowered, killed or executed, in the aftermath of his escape attempt and never heard from thereafter [2, 3]. With Sultan Muqarrab Khan's passing, hundreds of years of Gakkhar ascendancy in Pothohar came to an end. Pothohar remained a contested territory between the Sikh confederacy and Afghan monarchs for many decades to come but Gakkhars were never able to recover their lost influence and were ultimately fully subjugated by the Sikh empire.

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Undoubtedly, Sultan Muqarrab Khan was one of the most powerful and celebrated Gakkhar chiefs in the middle of the 18th century. However, there is little information that has come to light about his life and times in contemporary historical records maintained by independent chroniclers. After Sultan Muqarrab's death, his son Sultan Nadir Ali Khan ordered Raizada Brijnath, son of Raizada Diwan Dunichand, the author of Kaigoharnama, to update the book by adding details of later events. Raizada Brijnath's description of Sultan Muqarrab Khan is contemporary and quite detailed. This description may have been modified or updated by Raizada Ratanchand, a descendant of Raizada Dunichand, and an author and scribe, who lived and worked during the first half and early years of the second half of the 19th century. It is likely that Raizada Ratanchand had access to primary sources i.e. firsthand accounts of the events concerning Sultan Muqarrab Khan however the description as it appears in the Kaigoharnama is self-contradictory at certain points as it does not follow a well defined chronological order [4, 5]. Nonetheless, Kaigoharnama remains the primary source of information about Sultan Muqarrab Khan and the state of affairs in Pothohar during a tumultuous period of the history of the subcontinent.

Sultan Muqarrab Khan succeeded as the hereditary ruler of parganah Pharwala after the death of his father Sultan Muazzam Quli Khan in 1734-35. A local chronicler has recorded his mother's name as Bibi Shukar Bano [6]. Sultan Muqarrab's given name was Mukarram but he was popularly known as Muqarrab Khan. In all extant manuscripts of Kaigoharnama and various historical accounts written in Farsi, his given name has been generally used. A rare exception is a sanad (dated 1798-99) granted by the Afghan king Zaman Shah Durrani (1767-1845) to his son and grandson Sultan Mansur Ali Khan and Fateh Ali Khan, respectively, in which Muqarrab

instead of Mukarram has been entered as the father's name of Sultan Mansur Ali Khan [4]. The use of Muqarrab as an alternative of Mukarram was popularized by colonial era orientalist historians and it has been adopted as the standard form of Sultan Muqarrab Khan's name ever since. In this historical note, I have retained the popular form of Sultan Muqarrab Khan's name as well.

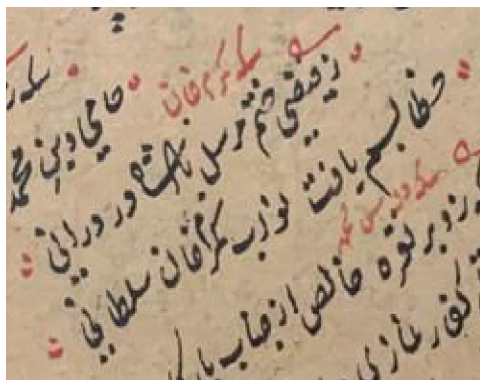
Sultan Muqarrab Khan's father and grandfather served as mansabdars of the Mughal empire. They were usually posted in the modern day districts of Kohat, Bannu, and Mianwali, which then formed a part of the Kabul subah [4, 5]. The Gakkhar stronghold of Muazzam Nagar located in the cis-Indus tract of the Mianwali district was central to Mughal dominance and authority in this region [7]. Sultan Muqarrab Khan may have been appointed to an assignment in any of the above noted districts on succeeding his father.

The authority of the Mughal empire, weakened by years of palace intrigues and internecine warfare was dealt a crippling blow by the Shah of Iran Nader Shah Afshar (1698-1747) when he attacked India in 1738. The political and social turmoil that existed before and after the invasion enabled feudatories of the Mughal empire to assert themselves more independently. Sultan Muqarrab Khan and other Gakkhar chiefs of Pothohar, responding to the changed circumstances, adopted an increasingly autonomous approach in administering their territories. The tripartite reacquisition of parganah Dangali, a royal domain since the reign of emperor Shah Alam I (1643-1712), by Sultan Muqarrab Khan, Diwan Ahmed Khan (from Mirpur), and Sultan Mahabat Khan/Hayatullah Khan (from Akbarabad-Takhtpari) in 1736-37 without regal sanction is an example of dauntless assertiveness on part of the Gakkhar chiefs that would not have been otherwise tolerated by a strong willed emperor [4, 5]. The existence of this tripartite alliance may have been necessitated due to the deteriorating state of affairs in Pothohar that required a pooling of resources to ward off internal and external threats. Sultan Muqarrab Khan came to the aid of the Gakkhar chiefs of the parganah of Akbarabad-Takhtpari when the fortress of Rawalpindi, their stronghold in the heart of the town, was overrun by Khojam Quli Khan, the faujdar of Attock, and defeated the intruders. He also assisted Diwan Ahmed Khan in dominating those local chiefs who had challenged his influence in the Andarhal-Mirpur region [8, 4, 5].

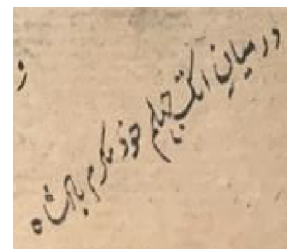
The uncertain political situation that prevailed in Punjab in the aftermath of Nader Shah's invasion offered Sultan Muqarrab Khan an opportunity to expand his influence and to acquire further territory across the river Jhelum. In 1741, he established himself at Gujrat and in the years to come became a dominant force in the Jech (Chenhat) doab [9-11]. Sultan Muqarrab Khan's authority within Pothohar was contested by Raja Himmat Khan of Domeli (Sohawa), another Gakkhar chief possessing considerable resources and power. Raja Himmat Khan in

collusion with several other notables resorted to the force of arms to remove a senior associate of Sultan Muqarrab Khan from his post. This associate was related to Sultan Muqarrab Khan by marriage and managed all his affairs pertaining to troops and estate. In the ensuing conflict, which involved a military standoff and local warfare, the particular individual was killed. Sultan Muqarrab Khan retaliated by conducting brutal reprisals and pillaged and burned the villages of many of the alleged perpetrators of the uprising. After some time, Sultan Nawazish Ali Khan, the Gakkhar chief of Khanpur intervened to restore normalcy and some participants of the uprising including those who were earlier employed by Sultan Muqarrab were granted clemency [4, 5, 12]. Apparently, the feud between Sultan Muqarrab Khan and Raja Himmat Khan was never settled and became a source of bitter rivalry between the two. This rivalry would later cast a dark shadow on the history of Gakhars with unprecedented consequences.

When the Afghan king Ahmad Shah Abdali (1722-1772) invaded India for the first time in 1747-48, the Gakkhar chiefs of Pothohar were unsure of his intentions [13]. A part of his army had forced Gakhars to abandon Muazzam Nagar and razed it to the ground [7]. At Rohtas, he ordered the sacking of the temple complex of Tilla Jogian [14]. These acts of wanton pillage may have been accompanied with other atrocities directed at local population. The Gakkhar chiefs only submitted when it became clear that the king will not tolerate their insolence anymore and grant their territory to whomsoever he considered fit. A reallocation of the parganahs of Pothohar was carried out on the orders of Ahmad Shah Abdali. Sultan Muqarrab Khan was granted full proprietary rights of Pharwala and Dangali and he was confirmed in his possessions across the river Jhelum as well [4, 5, 9].



1(a)



1(b)

Sultan Muqarrab Khan's submission to Ahmad Shah Abdali had its merits and demerits. The obvious advantage was royal patronage and backing. Starting from 1748 or soon thereafter, Sultan Muqarrab operated as a quasi-independent vassal of the Afghan king exercising absolute authority in his domains. He issued his own coins from Pharwala and Sultanpur (Dina) bearing the adage that declared him suzerain of the country between the rivers Indus and Jhelum [15,

16]. This measure was evidently only symbolic in effect but it was significant enough that many contemporary and later day chroniclers made a note of it. A late 18th century author and scribe prepared a detailed record of the inscriptions that appeared on coins issued by various monarchs and local rulers of India and Afghanistan during the 17th and 18th centuries. The inscriptions ascribed to Sultan Muqarrab Khan are shown in the photographs labeled 1(a) and 1(b) above [17]. So far, only two types of coins attributed to Sultan Muqarrab Khan have been documented i.e. a copper coin with the mint name Pharwala, issued in 1754-55, and a silver coin with the mint name Sultanpur, issued in 1718-19 [15, 16]. The date that appears on the silver coin is erroneous as in 1718-19 Sultan Muqarrab Khan's grandfather Sultan Dilawar Khan was the hereditary Gakkhar chief of parganah Pharwala [16]. Sultan Muqarrab Khan did not succeed his father until 1734-35.

The greatest disadvantage of Sultan Muqarrab Khan's switching of allegiance was making new enemies. All those who opposed the Afghan king would now oppose Sultan Muqarrab Khan as well. In the years to come, on behalf of Ahmad Shah Abdali, Sultan Muqarrab Khan had to confront and fight duplicitous functionaries of the Mughal dynasty and their local allies, the Maratha empire, and the Sikh confederacy. On multiple occasions, these factions combined their resources and offered formidable resistance to the Afghan king. In 1756-57, Sultan Muqarrab Khan's sons Nadir Ali Khan and Asadullah Khan along with their contingent of troops accompanied Ahmad Shah Abdali on his fourth invasion of India and were present at the infamous sack of Mathura following the capture of Delhi by the Afghan army [4, 5, 13]. All political factions vying for power in the Punjab would make or break compacts at will to suit their interests and a state of near anarchy persisted throughout the province. During these perfidious times, Sultan Muqarrab Khan managed to hold on to his hereditary possessions in Pothohar firmly. However, his fortune across the river Jhelum remained mixed and he had to repeatedly abandon and regain his territorial holdings in the Jech (Chenhat) doab [13, 18]. In 1758, he was even compelled to rethink his alliance with Ahmad Shah Abdali when faced with Maratha onslaught aimed at eliminating Afghan influence from the Indian territory [19]. Subsequent expeditions of Ahmad Shah Abdali would push the Marathas out of the Punjab. This was followed by a crushing defeat during the third battle of Panipat in 1761 from which the Maratha empire was not able to fully recover for at least a decade.

During and after the military expedition targeting the Maratha power, Afghan hold on Punjab was continuously challenged by the Sikh confederacy. The magnitude of the troubles reached such an extent that Ahmad Shah Abdali had to mount another expedition to subjugate the Sikhs in the winter months of 1761-62 [1, 20]. After prolonged military operations in the heartland of the Sikh territory that caused much bloodshed without a clear victory, Ahmad Shah Abdali left India for Afghanistan towards the end of 1762 [13]. Sultan Muqarrab Khan was granted the title

of Nawab by Ahmad Shah Abdali during this period [4, 5, 2]. The description of Kaigoharnama following this event is ambiguous and contrary to what has been reported in external historical sources. Despite the conferment of the title, there was no change in Sultan Muqarrab Khan's territorial possessions or his responsibilities. He was never appointed a subahdar of Lahore region as reported in the Kaigoharnama and some of the events that have been attributed to Sultan Muqarrab Khan by Raizada Brijnath appear to have been mixed up [4, 5]. In fact, Ahmad Shah Abdali appointed Kabuli Mal as the governor of Lahore while Jahan Khan was given the charge of the Rechna and Sindh Sagar doabs with the additional responsibility for Peshawar [13]. Incidentally, a daughter of Sultan Muqarrab Khan was married to Sardar Jahan Khan. Sardar Jahan Khan had earlier intervened on behalf of Nadir Ali Khan, Sultan Muqarrab Khan's son, and requested the king for granting one-half of the proprietary rights of the parganah of Dangali to his brother in law. The request was granted notwithstanding Sultan Muqarrab Khan's reservations [4, 5]. Sultan Muqarrab had married multiple times. Apparently, Sultan Nadir Ali Khan and Sardar Jahan Khan's wife were full siblings.

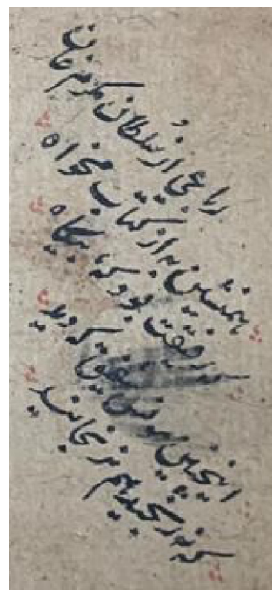
Sultan Muqarrab Khan's stern outlook and military exploits as described in the Kaigoharnama have overshadowed his other qualities [4, 5]. He has been generally remembered as a fair and just ruler who was concerned about the well being of his dependents throughout Pothohar in multiple contemporary or near contemporary historical sources [21]. Sultan Muqarrab was equally well liked in Gujrat and his battle with the Sikhs and subsequent defeat and death was immortalized in a heroic ode composed by a local balladeer. In Gujrat, the original construction of a ruined oriental pavilion or baradari with an adjoining garden located at a distance of one mile from the city has been attributed to Sultan Muqarrab Khan. This pavilion was later reconstructed on the orders of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) who used to stay here whenever he visited Gujrat [11, 10].

A distinct characteristic of Gakkhar chiefs was their liberal disposition regarding religion. Sultan Muqarrab Khan was no exception and many of his close associates were Hindus [4, 5]. Mahan Singh (d. 1844) was a distinguished military commander during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who served in the Hazara region and laid foundation of the modern day city of Mansehra. Mahan Singh belonged to Mirpur and his father Data Ram was a confidential servant of Sultan Muqarrab Khan [22, 23].

A peculiar legend related to Sultan Muqarrab Khan that found its way into the Kaigoharnama concerns a saint and a chanteuse. Apparently, acting on her husband's complaint, Sultan Muqarrab Khan rebuked and mistreated a chanteuse who frequently visited a saint residing in Pharwala. The saint warned Sultan Muqarrab Khan of divine punishment on her uncouth treatment and even predicted the name of the individual who would cause the ultimate

downfall of the Gakkhars. The saint and the chanteuse were expelled from Pharwala soon after and took shelter in Kahuta [4, 5]. The mausoleum of the saint and the grave of the chanteuse located near its main gate have survived to this day.

At some time immediately preceding his sudden demise, Sultan Muqarrab Khan ordered Raizada Brijnath to compile a detailed history of all villages of the parganahs of Pharwala and Dangali. The subsequent book titled 'Wajah-i-Tasmia Dehat-i-Pothohar' believed to be completed in 1762-63 is a valuable resource of information about the founding and antiquity of hundreds of villages of Pothohar [24]. Raizada Brijnath has noted that Sultan Muqarrab Khan had an excellent command on Farsi and wrote poetry. He has also mentioned that Sultan Muqarrab's poetry was collected in the form of a compilation titled 'Diwan-e-Jami' [4, 5]. The historicity of this compilation and its whereabouts remain uncertain. Only two couplets ascribed to Sultan Muqarrab Khan have come to light so far shown in the photograph labeled 2 below. These couplets were written in the margins of a manuscript transcribed in the late 18th century [25]. The scribe has used the term rubai to identify this pair of independent couplets, which is obviously incorrect.



2

The events surrounding Sultan Muqarrab Khan's death have remained a mystery for more than two centuries. There is a distinct variation of narratives in the chronicles of the native and the British historians with only a few exceptions. The native historians have noted that Sultan Muqarrab Khan along with his family and a body of troops broke out from the Gujrat fort but was either followed and killed in a skirmish with the Sikh soldiery or drowned while crossing a flooded stream riding an elephant [2, 3, 26]. The British historians have described this event

rather differently. They have observed that Sultan Muqarrab Khan managed to escape from Gujrat and made it to the west bank of the river Jhelum where he was captured and executed by Raja Himmat Khan, the rival Gakkhar chief who now had an opportunity to exact a revenge for his unsettled feud [22, 27-31]. None of these scenarios can be established with any certainty given the absence of firsthand accounts.

At the time of the Sikh attack on Gujrat and Sultan Muqarrab Khan's death, Nawab Sarbuland Khan, a relation of Ahmad Shah Abdali, was deputed as the faujdar of Rohtas. Apparently, Nawab Sarbuland Khan suspected treachery and ordered the execution of Raja Himmat Khan and two of his brothers, who were either unwilling or just simply failed to assist Sultan Muqarrab Khan in his struggle against the Sikhs [12, 4, 5]. Nawab Sarbuland Khan recaptured Gujrat and put to sword Chaudhary Rahmat Khan as well, the influential chief of Jalalpur Jattan, who had abandoned Sultan Muqarrab Khan and aided and abetted Sikhs during their attack on Gujrat [13, 11]. In a short duration, Nawab Sarbuland Khan was himself overpowered and detained by a Sikh force jointly led by Sardar Charat Singh Sukerchakia and Sardar Gujjar Singh Bhangi following a siege and storming of the Rohtas fort. He was only able to buy back his freedom after paying a hefty ransom [13, 32]. Sultan Muqarrab Khan's eldest sons Sultan Nadir Ali Khan and Asadullah Khan returned to Pothohar and remained in possession of the parganahs of Pharwala and Dangali for a brief period. Sardar Gujjar Singh attacked and pillaged Pharwala fort in 1765 and reduced both Gakkhar chiefs to complete submission [4, 5, 33].

The fate of Sultan Muqarrab Khan's remains is unknown. Perhaps his retainers were never able to recover his corpse following their flight from Gujrat and the ensuing chaos. The last dominant Gakkhar chief deserved an interment worth his status but a warrior's destiny is forever difficult to foretell.

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